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ARTICLE APPEARED
ON PAGE 44-45

COMMENTARY
September 1981

CBS vs. Defense

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THIS PAST June CBS-TV News broadcast "an unprecedented documentary project, more ambitious than any CBS News has undertaken," entitled *The Defense of the United States*. The series ran for an hour of prime time on each of five consecutive nights. So pleased was CBS with its product that it took the unusual step of rebroadcasting the entire series in August.

The series' anchorman, Dan Rather, termed it "the most important documentary project of the decade." The reviewers agreed, the *Washington Post* hailing the series as "the first documentary epic in TV history," *Time* calling it "not only the longest and most expensive network documentary ever but perhaps the most thoughtful and incisive TV examination of the American military as well," and the *Economist* (London) solemnly allowing that "CBS has shown that American television, when freed from the crass commercialism which dominates so much of its output, is a match for anyone."

Official CBS spokesmen described the series as "balanced," "fair," "accurate," and maintained that it expressed no point of view. Its executive producer, Howard Stringer, qualified this somewhat by acknowledging that the broadcasts "did draw some conclusions." These conclusions were expressed by the *Christian Science Monitor* (which also lauded the series as "masterly," "skillful," and "thoughtful"):

If the series has one overwhelming message, it is the one that emerges time and time again throughout each segment but is finally verbalized in the concluding segment. . . . "You can't buy peace simply by spending more and more on arms."

This jibes with statements by people connected with the show itself. Thus, Howard Stringer told

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the *Christian Science Monitor* that "We want to stimulate a debate which . . . [CBS News President] Bill Leonard felt had never been started. . . . Here we were and are about to embark on this colossal defense spending spree with few questions asked and very little debate." The theme was echoed by Dan Rather who said: "We were about to make the largest peacetime commitment to defense in our history without much debate." Rather hoped the series would "start the debate rolling in every town and city in America." According to Stringer, so much money is being spent on U.S. nuclear forces because not enough people are standing up to say "Now, wait a minute!" The problem, Stringer told *TV Guide*, is that "somehow the opposition just isn't doing its job."

CBS's "message" was not lost on partisans in the defense debate. The staunchly pro-military American Security Council wrote to demand air time for a rebuttal to the series. Others, considerably less "hard-line," were also put off by the series. In an essay in the *Washington Star*, John Kester, who served as special assistant to Secretary of Defense Brown in the Carter administration, wrote that CBS had provided an example of "the least honest and most seductive" of the efforts of "the old anti-defense crowd" to "offer a different set of explanations to support an answer that has hardly changed at all: that money spent on defense is wasted."

On the other side of the defense debate there were cheers. The *Christian Science Monitor* observed that while "militant individuals . . . may find good reason to object to this series . . . anybody searching for serious peaceful solutions to the world's problems will welcome [this] innovative use of the public airwaves." The *Village Voice* columnist Alexander Cockburn exulted:

The mass media are beginning to swing [against defense spending]. After seven years of almost total silence, we may soon see a return to . . . grim descriptions of cost-overrun scandals and other depredations of the milit-ind-cplx [sic]. Next week . . . CBS is airing a five-part series . . . which should sober people up in fairly short order.

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